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NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/MARCHESE/HARDING

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: MARCH 14 LEADERS ARE CERTAIN OF SYRIA'S
CULPABILITY IN GEMAYEL'S DEATH

CLASSIFIED BY: AMBASSADOR JEFFREY D. FELTMAN. REASON: SECTION 1.4 (B)

SUMMARY

11. (C) DEFENSE MINISTER ELIAS MURR TOLD THE AMBASSADOR AND EMBOFF THAT HE IS ABSOLUTELY CERTAIN THE SYRIAN REGIME ORDERED AND EXECUTED THE ASSASSINATION OF MINISTER PIERRE GEMAYEL ON NOVEMBER 21. THE TIMING, METHOD OF EXECUTION, AND POLITICAL CONSEQUENCES OF THE OPERATION POINT DIRECTLY BACK

TO DAMASCUS. MURR SAID THAT IRAN AND SAUDI ARABIA WERE CLOSE TO REACHING A COMPROMISE SOLUTION TO LEBANON'S POLITICAL CRISIS, AND SYRIA, BEING THE ODD MAN OUT, ACTED "LIKE THE MAFIA" TO ELIMINATE ANY POSSIBILITY THAT THE THREATENING SPECIAL TRIBUNAL WOULD EVER BE ESTABLISHED. MURR WAS UNCERTAIN WHETHER HIZBALLAH WAS AWARE OF THE OPERATION -- ON THE ONE HAND IT UNDERCUT HIZBALLAH'S MOMENTUM IN ITS EFFORT TO TOPPLE THE SINIORA GOVERNMENT, BUT ON THE OTHER, SOME OF HIZBALLAH'S EARLIER STATEMENTS MIGHT HAVE INDICATED ADVANCE KNOWLEDGE OF THE ACTION. IN A SEPARATE MEETING, FATHER OF THE SLAIN MINISTER, FORMER PRESIDENT AMIN GEMAYEL AND LEBANESE FORCES LEADER SAMIR JA'JA' INFORMED THE AMBASSADOR AND EMBOFF THAT THEY ALSO WERE CONVINCED OF SYRIA'S INVOLVEMENT, WITH JA'JA STATING THE PROFESSIONALLY-EXECUTED MURDER HAD ALL THE EARMARKS OF THE SYRIAN SPECIAL FORCES. JAJA EXPLAINED THE ASSASSINS MAY HAVE USED LOCAL SURVEILLANCE ASSETS, BUT THEY WERE PROFESSIONAL KILLERS WHO DID NOT CARE WHO SAW THEM AND ACTED WITH COMPLETE CONFIDENCE IN THEIR ABILITY TO ESCAPE. AMIN GEMAYEL, MEANWHILE, URGED THE U.S. TO CONVINCE ITS ALLIES ON THE UN SECURITY COUNCIL TO IMMEDIATELY IMPLEMENT THE SPECIAL TRIBUNAL UNDER CHAPTER 7 AUTHORITY, "BEFORE THE SYRIANS KILL US ALL." END SUMMARY.

12. (C) DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER AND MINISTER OF DEFENSE ELIAS MURR, HIMSELF A NEAR-FATAL VICTIM OF A SUSPECTED SYRIA ASSASSINATION ATTEMPT IN JULY 2005, MET WITH THE AMBASSADOR AND EMBOFF ON NOVEMBER 22 AT HIS HEAVILY-GUARDED RESIDENCE IN RABIEH (LOCATED ONLY A FEW HUNDRED METERS FROM THE HOUSE OF FPM LEADER MICHEL AOUN). MURR APPEARED EXCEPTIONALLY WELL-INFORMED WITH THE INITIAL FINDINGS FROM THE CRIME SCENE AND SHARED THEM FREELY. IN THE MIDDLE OF THE MEETING, PRO-SYRIAN PRESIDENT (AND MURR'S FORMER FATHER-IN-LAW) EMILE LAHOUD CALLED AND ASKED HIS DEFENSE MINISTER FOR ADDITIONAL LAF TROOPS TO GUARD THE APPROACHES TO BAABDA PALACE IN ADVANCE OF TOMORROW'S FUNERAL FOR THE SLAIN PIERRE GEMAYEL. ACCORDING TO MURR, THE PRESIDENT WAS ANXIOUS NOT TO HAVE HIS ELITE PRESIDENTIAL GUARD BLOCK ANY CROWDS

ADVANCING ON THE PALACE, BUT PREFERRED TO HAVE THE MORE POPULAR LAF POSITIONED BETWEEN BAABDA AND DOWNTOWN BEIRUT WHERE THE FUNERAL WILL TAKE PLACE. MURR ASSURED THE PRESIDENT HE WOULD BE SAFE, AND HANGING UP, GAVE AN IRONIC SHRUG TO HIS GUESTS.

ODD MAN OUT

13. (C) MURR INFORMED THE AMBASSADOR THAT HE HAD CREDIBLE REPORTS THAT IRAN AND SAUDI ARABIA HAD BEEN RECENTLY ENGAGED IN NEGOTIATIONS TO FIND A SOLUTION TO THE POLITICAL CRISIS IN LEBANON IN WHICH THE INCREASINGLY POWERFUL SHIA COMMUNITY, LED BY HIZBALLAH, WERE DEMANDING A GREATER NUMBER OF SEATS IN THE ALL-IMPORTANT COUNCIL OF MINISTERS. ACCORDING TO MURR, A SOLUTION WAS CLOSE AT HAND, AND THE SYRIANS HAD BELATEDLY DISCOVERED THEY -- AND THEIR PRIMARY OBJECTIVE OF SCUTTling THE SPECIAL TRIBUNAL -- HAD NOT BEEN INCLUDED IN THE DEAL.

14. (C) THE SYRIAN REGIME REACTED PRECIPITOUSLY AND "LIKE THUGS" DECIDED TO MURDER NOT ONLY A MARCH 14 LEADER, BUT A MARONITE HEAD OF A CHRISTIAN PARTY, TO INSTILL FEAR AND ACCELERATE THE COLLAPSE OF THE SINIORA GOVERNMENT. MURR SAID THERE HAD BEEN INDICATIONS THAT BOTH FORMER PRESIDENT AMIN GEMAYEL AND HIS SON, PIERRE GEMAYEL, HAD BEEN UNDER SURVEILLANCE FOR AT LEAST TWO MONTHS, ALMOST ASSUREDLY BY MEMBERS OF THE SYRIAN SOCIALIST NATIONALIST PARTY (SSNP), WHICH IS LED BY STAUNCHLY PRO-SYRIAN ASAD HARDEN (WHOSE SSNP HAD BEEN DEEPLY IMPLICATED IN THE ASSASSINATION OF FORMER PRESIDENT-ELECT BASHIR GEMAYEL IN 1982) AND WHO ENJOY A BASE OF SUPPORT IN JDEIDE, THE SCENE OF THE MURDER.

TEACHING A LESSON

15. (C) MURR BELIEVES THAT THE SHORT TIME FUSE OF SYRIAS

LEARNING OF THE IMPENDING POLITICAL COMPROMISE GAVE IT ONLY DAYS TO PLAN AND EXECUTE THE ASSASSINATION. PIERRE GEMAYEL, WHO HAS BEEN TRAVELING WIDELY ACROSS LEBANON IN LIGHTLY PROTECTED VEHICLES (SWITCHED DAILY WITH A RENTAL COMPANY) IN AN EFFORT TO EXPAND THE QATA'IB PARTY HIS GRANDFATHER FOUNDED, WAS A RELATIVELY EASY TARGET. MURR SAID THE SWITCH OF METHODOLOGY FROM CAR BOMBS TO SHOOTING WAS DICTATED BY SEVERAL FACTORS: TIME WAS RUNNING SHORT FOR THE SYRIANS TO GET GEMAYEL, A WELL-EXECUTED SHOOTING WOULD LEAVE LESS EVIDENCE, THE ASSASSINS COULD BE EASILY SENT IN FROM SYRIA, BUT MOST IMPORTANTLY FOR THE SYRIANS, A SUCCESSFUL SHOOTING IN A BUSY NEIGHBORHOOD IN BROAD DAYLIGHT WOULD "HUMILIATE" LEBANON'S SECURITY SERVICES -- AND DEMONSTRATE THAT THE SYRIANS COULD ONCE AGAIN ACT WITH IMPUNITY.

16. (C) MURR SAID THE INITIAL INVESTIGATION SHOWS THAT THE ASSASSINS WERE SKILLED, CALM, AND CONFIDENT. ALTHOUGH THE INITIAL BARRAGE OF GUNFIRE CAME FROM SILENCER-EQUIPPED 9MM MACHINE GUNS, ONE ASSASSIN THEN CALMLY OPENED THE DRIVER DOOR AND ADMINISTERED THE COUP D'GRACE WITH A REVOLVER. THE THREE GUNMEN, WHO WERE TRAVELING IN A BLACK HONDA SUV, ALSO CALMLY GUNNED DOWN THE LAST SURVIVING BODYGUARD AS HE TRIED TO FLEE THE SCENE. (NOTE: THIS BODYGUARD SURVIVED AND IS PRESENTLY IN THE CUSTODY OF THE MINISTRY OF DEFENSE UNDERGOING DEBRIEFING. BECAUSE THIS ACT IS CONSIDERED TO BE TERRORIST IN NATURE, LEBANONS MILITARY PROSECUTOR HAS JURISDICTION. END NOTE.)

17. (C) MURR WAS ABSOLUTELY CERTAIN IT WAS A SYRIAN PLANNED AND CONTROLLED OPERATION. HE WAS LESS CERTAIN ABOUT WHETHER HIZBALLAH HAD BEEN AWARE OF THE PLAN BEFOREHAND. MURR SAID IT SEEMED ILLOGICAL TO HIM THAT IF HIZBALLAH WAS ABOUT TO GAIN A POLITICAL ADVANTAGE FROM ANY POLITICAL DEAL, THE SYRIANS WOULD HARDLY INCLUDE THEM IN THEIR PLANS. ON THE OTHER HAND, MURR BROUGHT UP THE CURIOUS EMPHASIS THAT HASSAN NASRALLAH HAD PLACED ON A FAR-FETCHED CONSPIRACY THEORY THAT THE U.S. EMBASSY WAS SOMEHOW INVOLVED IN ASSASSINATIONS THAT WOULD EMPLOY SILENCER-EQUIPPED WEAPONS.

18. (C) CONCERNING THE POLITICAL CONSEQUENCES, MINISTER MURR

SAID IT WAS IMPERATIVE TO SEND SYRIA A POWERFUL MESSAGE THAT IT COULD NOT CONTINUE ITS CAMPAIGN OF TERROR. MURR AGREED THAT LEBANESE ADOPTION OF THE SPECIAL TRIBUNAL AS SOON AS POSSIBLE WAS A KEY OBJECTIVE, BUT HE INDICATED THE COMPLEX REQUIREMENTS OF LEBANON'S CABINET/PARLIAMENTARY APPROVAL PROCESS WAS MAKING SUCH A DEVELOPMENT INCREASINGLY UNLIKELY AND THE DEBATE INCREASINGLY DANGEROUS.

AOUN EMBARRASSED

¶9. (C) ABOUT THE ONLY GOOD THING TO COME OUT OF THE TRAGEDY WAS THAT MURR NOW FELT FPM LEADER (AND PUTATIVE ALLY OF HIZBALLAH) MICHEL AOUN WAS NOW IN A HIGHLY EMBARRASSING POSITION. PIERRE GEMAYEL WAS THE FIRST MARONITE LEADER TO BE KILLED IN THE VIOLENCE DATING BACK TO OCTOBER 2004 AND FOR AOUN TO TAKE TO THE STREETS ALONGSIDE HIZBALLAH AT THIS TIME WOULD STRONGLY TEST THE LOYALTY OF HIS CHRISTIAN POWERBASE. MURR BELIEVED THAT THE GEMAYEL ASSASSINATION MIGHT STAY AOUN'S HAND AND POSSIBLY GIVE THE SINIORA GOVERNMENT SOME (SLIGHT) BREATHING SPACE.

¶10. (C) ONE OTHER POSSIBLE ADVANTAGE IS THAT THE BRUTALITY OF THE MURDER MIGHT CONVINCE MINISTER OF ENVIRONMENT YACCOUB SARRAF, WHO UNDER THREAT FROM HIZBALLAH HAD SUBMITTED HIS RESIGNATION TO SINIORA LAST WEEK, MIGHT RECONSIDER AND RETURN TO THE PRO-REFORM FOLD. IN FACT, MURR SAID HE HAD SENT SARRAF A CAUSTIC MESSAGE ACCUSING HIM OF COMPLICITY IN PIERRE'S DEATH BECAUSE HE HAD EMBOLDENED THE SYRIANS. SARRAF REPORTEDLY ASKED TO MEET WITH MURR TO EXPLAIN HIS POSITION, BUT MURR HAD REBUFFED THE REQUEST AND TOLD HIM FLATLY THAT SARRAF KNEW WHAT HE HAD TO DO AS A POINT OF HONOR.

¶11. (C) MURR'S OVERALL VIEW OF THE SITUATION WAS DIRE, BUT NOT HOPELESS. HE CONFIRMED EARLIER REPORTS THAT FORMER MINISTER OF THE INTERIOR (AND HARIRI ALLY) HASSAN SABA' WAS INDEED RETURNING TO THE COUNCIL OF MINISTERS, FOLLOWING HIS FORCED RESIGNATION LAST FEBRUARY FOLLOWING THE SUNNI FUNDAMENTALIST RIOTS IN BEIRUT. IT SURELY WOULD NOT BE A WIDELY HAILED MOVE, BUT IT WOULD GIVE THE SINIORA CABINET THE ADDED SAFETY OF ANOTHER LOYAL MEMBER. THAT DEVELOPMENT, ALONG WITH THE POSSIBLE (BUT WE JUDGE UNLIKELY) RETURN OF SARRAF, COULD YET DEFEAT THE APPARENT SYRIAN PLAN TO ASSASSINATE THEIR WAY TO A COLLAPSE OF THE PRO-REFORM

GOVERNMENT. AND ALTHOUGH MURR WAS CONCERNED WITH THE EMOTIONAL REACTION OF THE UNTESTED SAAD HARIRI (WHO APPARENTLY BROKE HIS HAND BY SLAMMING THE TABLE IN FRUSTRATION AT THE NEWS OF HIS FRIEND'S DEATH), HE WAS REASSURED BY THE STEADFASTNESS OF PRIME MINISTER SINIORA. MUCH WOULD DEPEND, REASONED MURR, ON TOMORROW'S SHOW OF STRENGTH BY THE PRO-REFORM FORCES -- AND THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITIES HOPED-FOR PUNISHING REBUKE OF SYRIA.

FORMER PRESIDENT GEMAYEL
AND JA'JA' JOIN FORCES

¶12. (C) THE MURR MEETING WAS IMMEDIATELY FOLLOWED BY A CONDOLENCE CALL TO THE GEMAYEL FAMILY IN THEIR HOME VILLAGE OF BKFAYA, LOCATED NORTH OF BEIRUT IN THE METN REGION MOUNTAINS. THE LARGE GEMAYEL ANCESTRAL HOME WAS FILLED TO BURSTING WITH MOURNERS, SUPPORTERS, AND MEDIA. FOLLOWING WORDS WITH THE FAMILY, THE AMBASSADOR MET WITH LEBANESE FORCES LEADER SAMIR JA'JA' AND FORMER PRESIDENT AMIN GEMAYEL IN A PRIVATE STUDY.

¶13. (C) THE ELDER GEMAYEL GAVE HIS UNDERSTANDING OF THE PREVIOUS DAY'S EVENTS AND FORCEFULLY STATED THAT HIS SON'S DEATH MUST BE THE LAST ONE SYRIA GETS AWAY WITH. HE URGED THE U.S. AND LEBANON'S OTHER ALLIES TO SEND A MESSAGE THAT COMPELLED SYRIA TO END ITS CAMPAIGN OF INTIMIDATION AND VIOLENCE AGAINST DEMOCRATIC FORCES IN LEBANON. GEMAYEL STATED THAT DEMOCRACY IN LEBANON WAS BARELY HANGING ON, AND UNLESS SYRIA WAS RESTRAINED, IT WOULD SOON FALTER.

¶14. (C) SAMIR JAJA CONCURRED WITH HIS FRIENDS ANALYSIS

AND BLEAKLY NOTED THAT THE SPECIAL TRIBUNAL -- WHICH IN HIS VIEW WAS THE BANE OF THE SYRIAN REGIME -- HAD TO BE ESTABLISHED FORTHWITH. BOTH GEMAYEL AND JA'JA' ASKED IF THE UN SECURITY COUNCIL COULD NOT FIND A WAY TO PUSH THROUGH THE COURT WITHOUT THE EXTREMELY PROBLEMATIC LEBANESE CABINET AND PARLIAMENTARY CLEARANCES, WHICH THEY FELT HIZBALLAH AND SPEAKER NABIH BERRI WOULD OBSTRUCT AT EVERY TURN. GEMAYEL ASKED WHETHER THE UN CHAPTER 7 MECHANISM COULD NOT BE INVOKED. JA'JA' AND GEMAYEL EXPRESSED CONCERN THAT, AS LONG AS LEBANON HAD TO APPROVE THE DOCUMENTS, SYRIA HAD REASONS TO CONTINUING MURDERING THOSE WHO WOULD APPROVE THE TRIBUNAL.

¶15. (C) FORMER PRESIDENT GEMAYEL RECEIVED A CALL FROM PRESIDENT BUSH AT THIS POINT AND AFTERWARDS INDICATED THAT HE WOULD SPEAK WITH EGYPTIAN PRESIDENT HOSNI MUBARAK TO MUSTER SUPPORT FOR LEBANON INTERNATIONALLY. GEMAYEL, WHO EXPRESSED DEEP APPRECIATION FOR PRESIDENT BUSH'S CONCERN AND SUPPORT, CONCLUDED WITH HIS CONVICTION THAT LEBANON WAS AT A CRITICAL JUNCTURE AND THAT ONLY THE EXPEDITIOUS ESTABLISHMENT OF THE SPECIAL TRIBUNAL HAD A CHANCE TO STOP THE ACTS OF POLITICAL TERROR WHICH WAS CLOSE TO TOPPLING THE YOUNG DEMOCRACY.
FELTMAN